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ABSTRACT

The assumptions behind secondary school literature course tests--whether asking students to recall aspects of literary works, to relate literary works to each other, or to analyze unfamiliar literary works--are open to question. They fail to acknowledge some of the most important aspects of literature which, if properly taught, should provide a broad experience of domestic and foreign cultures, create a literate populace, develop student comprehension of and response to events, and cultivate an articulate and informed taste. With several specific behavioral objectives as testing guides, both objective and essay tests may be formulated--deftly and carefully-- which would include questions concerning comprhension, perception of literary forms, emotional response and its articulation, aesthetic judgment, and the value to the student of literary experiences. (JM)

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TESTING? TESTING? IN LITERATURE?

Alan C. Purves

Yes, yes, yes, and no, no, no, and might be, might be, might be are the three sets of answers I have to the questions in the title of this talk.

Yes, testing goes on. Yes testing in literature goes on. That is to say, teachers who teach literature courses often give tests. More often than not, these tests ask students to recall aspects of books, stories, poems, plays they have read. Or they ask students to place the works they have read into some larger context--thematic, most probably, although sometimes historical or sometimes aesthetic. Many literature courses have tests with questions like: "Napoleon and Snowball are rivals in what book?" or like "How do J. D. Salinger and Ann Petry treat the theme of the search for identity?" Some teachers will vary ~~the format of~~ from memory testing by using the critical reading test device of giving the students an unfamiliar text and asking them questions about that text--often asking for an analysis and interpretation of it.

I think that I have described what typifies most testing of students in secondary school literature courses. Students are asked to recall aspects of literary works; they are asked to relate literary works to each other, and they are asked to analyze unfamiliar literary works. Sometimes they are asked to perform these acts in timed tests, sometimes in take-home essays, sometimes in other media like film or some oral or dramatic form.

Sometimes teachers use externally prepared tests, like the Iowa tests or the Hoskins-Sanders tests. These tests ask many of the same sorts of questions although often in a multiple-choice format.

On the basis of these externally or internally made tests students are sorted and rated as to their literary ability or achievement. That is what is going on, I think. At least that is what I have observed.

CS 201 293

What are the assumptions behind this kind of testing? The first would seem to be that literary works--or certain parts of them should form part of the memory core of human beings. The second is that the students should be able to connect works of literature with each other according to a certain set of linkages--often the linkages of a unit or an elective course title. The third is that students should learn the operations of a professional critic or someone's perception of a professional critic.

Are these assumptions open to question? I think they are. I think it is questionable whether many of the things we ask students to remember are worth remembering. Who is Holden is perhaps worth asking; who is Horwitz in the same book is not quite as important I suspect, but asking that question is the one that's really going to trap them. The function of literature in the memory is not direct, it forms a part of the experiential world we have in our heads and we bring it forth in associative fashion more often than not.

I have a friend who when observing the 1972 campaign suddenly saw that George McGovern was like Jay Gatsby and our president very much like Nick Carraway. That is what Harry Broudy has called the associative use of learning, and it is probably the most important function of literature.

I also think it is questionable that we should expect students to put literary works into the pigeonholes that we have created. Why should Catcher in the Rye be classified as a search for identity book? Well why not? But it could also be classified a fifties book, a city book, a book about man's inhumanity to man, a book about families, a book about love, a book about growing up, a book about existentialism, a confessional book, an American book. Each of these and others could be the title for a unit into which Catcher could be placed. The linkages between selections are arbitrary as are the classifications

placed upon any single book. It might be as important for students to see what their pigeonholes are as it is to see if they can put things in ours.

As to the assumptions underlying analytical questions, the major assumption I have found is that the tester wants the student to ape the kind of criticism that the tester was trained in. I have recently completed a study of literature education in ten countries. One of the major findings of that study is that by the end of secondary school, most students in a country acquire a pattern of critical response to literary works characteristic of that country. We asked students and teachers to list the questions they thought most important to ask after reading a piece of fiction. At age fourteen, the students were interested in a wide variety of questions; by the end of secondary school they were interested in fewer. And wonder of wonders, they choose the questions that were preferred by the teachers. That finding bothers me. It bothers me in that I see the real criterion of achievement in literature being whether the students can agree with their teachers. It seems to me that that is what too many of the tests in literature are about, what too many of the judgments of achievement are.

Those then, are my no's. I think that the dangers of literature teaching and testing lie in the fact that they fail to acknowledge some of the most important aspects of literature and literature study. The first is that literature exists as a source of pleasure as well as a source of instruction--it instructs through pleasure. The second is that a single work of literature is incapable of being caught by any single criticism of it. It may not even be caught by a multiperspectived criticism. The third is that the experience of literature contains unique and common elements, unique to the individual reader and common to a class of readers.

This being so, I would say that teachers might be held accountable for certain aspects of literature education.

1. Teachers should, I think, be accountable to the public for providing a wide variety of literary selections to students. The reasons for this lie less in research than in conventional wisdom. We are a pluralistic society in a polycultural world, and students should experience as broad a variety of those cultures both foreign and domestic. I say experience advisedly, for I think that the measurement of broad experience can only be indirect. The fruits of broad reading occur as Harry Broudy says not as directly replicated in memory tests but as they are used in interpreting other experiences and the predictability of that use is quite uncertain.
2. Teachers should be held accountable for fostering an interest in literature and the variety of satisfaction people can gain this from. This objective I see negatively in that literature, reading, television watching, films, theatre, and the like are often enjoyed by many children in the early years of school and often they lose interest as they progress through school. This is true particularly in the United States ~~(I.E.A.)~~ and the cause may be laid in part to the actions of teachers and classes. This is a fundamental anomaly in the fact that we take a pleasurable leisure activity and make it work. We should, I think, make it play--serious play, intellectual play, but play. There are ways of doing it, I think. The reasons for doing it have to do with the creation of a literate articulate populace, for perpetuating the very pluralism that we cherish, and we should try to prevent literature from becoming the property of our elite.

3. Teachers should be held accountable for the development of abilities of students to comprehend and, more importantly, to be aware of how language and literature can manipulate their responses to events. News media, advertising, political speakers, poets all seek to manipulate people's responses to events. They do so through their control of language, through their manipulation of the shaping and structuring of events--what they put next to what, what they omit, and the like. A literate public should, I think, be aware of how literature and other verbal forms of expression operate to affect their thoughts and feelings.

4. I think teachers should be accountable for the development of an articulate and informal taste. I don't think teachers should or could influence the preferences of readers, but they can certainly raise with their students questions of why they prefer what they do, questions of what might account for differences.

Can we build a set of tests or some principles of testing on these principles? Here is where the might be's enter. Before we make up tests, we must make up test specifications, and these call for--yes, you guessed it--behavioral objectives. Let us try a couple of objectives on for size. The student is able to describe in his way the nature of the pleasure he derived from experiencing a piece of literature so that an observer is able to comprehend the nature of that pleasure. The student is able to communicate in his way the kind and degree of instruction he derived from a piece of literature so that an observer is able to comprehend the nature and extent of that instruction. The student is able to communicate his experience of a piece of literature in such a way that others may remark the ways in which that experience is unique or shared by others. These first three objectives deal primarily with the student's rhetorical ability. There is a fourth objective that derives from the fact that literature is an art form. The student is able to describe the ways by which the formal as well as the

experiential aspects of a piece of literature have operated to create the literary experience that that student has had in such a way that an observer can assent to the existence of those formal experiential aspects in the work and the possibility of their creating the experience described. This objective carries with it the rhetorical ability and some concepts about literature as an art form.

All of the objectives speak to the fact that the study of literature in schools assumes the importance of articulating one's experience. That articulation need not be written or verbal, but it must be communicated. It must speak where all the arts are dumb, as many critics have said. The objectives do not insist on the articulation meeting the criterion of matching the critical pronouncement of an adult, much less a professional. I have found in other studies that younger students tend to perceive literary works in terms of details and specifics rather than in terms of generalizations. Given a catalogue of symptoms about a sick character in a story, students tend not to generalize that the character is sick until they reach the age of fifteen or sixteen. At the upper reaches of secondary school they may be ready to go beyond such generalizations to symbolic readings. Why should we expect a group of adolescents to perceive an adolescent character from the vantage point of a middle-aged Ph.D. or even a college graduate who has been the student of that middle-aged Ph.D?

What sorts of tests might we derive from these objectives? First of all they would be tests that require the student to perceive a literary selection, respond to it, and express a response. As far as perception is concerned, the tests might ask how the student perceives certain aesthetic or literary concepts operating in the selection: what voice or voices did the student observe, what did the student perceive as the shape or structure of the selection, what linguistic transformations of experience did the student observe. Are there right answers to these questions? In a general sense there are. In Catcher in the Rye there is a narrator Holden; is Holden equivalent to J. D. Salinger?

what other voices and points of view appear? I think consensus would suggest that Holden is the main voice and main point of view; others are seen through his eyes, which may or may not be those of J. D. Salinger. The structure is roughly chronological but told in retrospect, and it is episodic. The language is 1940's teen-age. This set of perceptions is relatively routine, the kind of summary statements that one could ask in a test of reading comprehension.

But the perception of the thing is not simply descriptive. How is the story perceived emotionally? For this kind of testing, one eminent scholar-teacher has used a series of scales. The student would be asked to rate Holden, say on a scale of one to five on such dimensions as sincerity, power, honesty, malevolence, toughness, changeableness, and the like. From this series of scales, which might be repeated at different times in the reading, the tester can get a sense of the student's emotional perception of the characters. Beyond that, the teacher might ask the student to talk or write about these emotions. Does the description fit the scales? Do the scales become fully articulated and communicated? Is the complexity of emotion recorded by the scales captured in the verbal description? The teacher would not expect it to be at first, but the students' growth might well be in terms of these criteria? The same kinds of scales might be used with the whole selection, although the terms might become more aesthetic ones, or ones more adaptable to the selection.

The next question is what do the students get out of the selection? Again a set of probing questions might be appropriate in that they might set the students to exploring their responses more fully than a simple "what did you get out of it?" One way is to pose a list of alternative areas of consideration. Do you think the story is more about human relationships, about society, about what goes on in a person, about the way we are, about the way we should be,

about yourself? These invitations are to be selected among, and then expanded. Another test situation would be to pose the students the problem of filming or staging the selection. What would be the selection's mood? How would characters be cast? How would the setting be done, how would the action go? The students are asked to confront all the issues they might cover in a paper or examination, but their testing could be on the coherence with which they justify their decisions and put them all together. The evidence would be that they were thinking about what they were doing.

These testing devices call for a variety of means. They call for some objective and even multiple-choice items. Certainly the lesser aspects of perception can be so measured, but those scores must be coordinated with judgments of the articulation of the subtler aspects of response, of the perception and translation into some externalized medium of that perception. The criterion for judging that statement is not whether the students perceptions are those of the teachers, but whether they conform to some of the rules of discourse. Are they clear? Are they coherent? Are they interesting? These judgments can be made individually by the teacher or collectively by a jury of other students.

There is one other aspect of testing in literature which should not be neglected. That is a test of whether literature and the literary experience is valued by the students. To so test is not to judge the students, but to judge the effectiveness of instruction. There is no reason for students not to value literature, not to be interested in it save for the success of schools in killing off that interest. If students emerge from a course or a curriculum liking reading, with fewer interests in books, films, theatre, television than they had entered with, then something drastic ought to be done about that

curriculum or course. In my interviews with high school seniors who don't like literature, I find that they can often pinpoint their dislike to a single class or a single teacher. More often than not that teacher was one who forced them into a particular critical mold before they were ready for it.

Testing in literature might, then, include questions of comprehension, questions of perception of certain literary forms, questions of emotional response and its articulation, questions of what the students got from the literature read, questions of aesthetic judgment, and questions of value about the literary experience. To give a comprehensive account of what one has done, one should include all these matters as well as matters concerning the amount of reading and literary activity the students have done and will do. All of this can be done without violating the series of experiences the students have had with literary works, without destroying the tentativeness and individuality of literary experience. It can be done deftly. It can be done very carefully. If one is going to hold oneself accountable for those aspects of literary instruction that I mentioned earlier, it must be done very carefully. One shouldn't try to trap the students, one should use tests to find out how far they have come in understanding themselves and how imaginative language works on their imaginations.

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